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THE PHANTOM COMICS AND THE NEW LEFT

A Socialist Superhero

Robert Aman

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Series Editor Roger Sabin is Professor of Popular Culture at the University of the Arts London, UK. His books include *Adult Comics: An Introduction* and *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels*, and he is part of the team that put together the Marie Duval Archive. He serves on the boards of key academic journals in the field, reviews graphic novels for international media, and consults on comics-related projects for the BBC, Channel 4, Tate Gallery, The British Museum and The British Library. The 'Sabin Award' is given annually at the International Graphic Novels and Comics Conference.

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Preface

To this day, just to the right of the brown and orange striped couch, there is still a white door leading to the garret on Trädgårdsvägen in Vadstena, a quaint town in southern Sweden. It was behind this pale door in my grandparents' house that I, like the Pevensie siblings entering the wardrobe gateway to Narnia, made my first discoveries of the world of comics. My uncles had since long moved out and left behind what was, in my eyes, an invaluable treasure in the form of comic books and albums, reflecting the dominant tastes of children growing up during the seventies and eighties in Sweden. Behind the door to the dimly lit garret, where an adult could not stand upright—which, in my mind, confirmed the feeling of entering a zone intended for children—Tintin, Blueberry and Corto Maltese awaited with their many thrilling adventures. However, the finest prize was something entirely different: bundles of *The Phantom* comic books. The fact that these comics were printed in black and white (like many readers of my own generation or older, the decision to start printing the Swedish *The Phantom* comic in color is 1991 is still considered questionable) only added layers of mystique to the adventures and the exotic environments around the world where various members of the Phantom dynasty have righted wrongs throughout history. There was something about the character that spoke to my young sensibility in a way that other members of the same guild—Spider-Man, Superman, or Batman—were unable to. Both DC Comics' and Marvel's stables of heroes were visually

thrilling, with pages in color that added a sense of luxury, but the stories never captured my imagination in quite the same way as the Phantom did.

His lack of superpowers may have played a part in this, making him come across as more human and relatable, but there was something else in his essence that made me, like so many others who grew up in Sweden during the 1970s, and 1980s, wholeheartedly embrace the adventures of the Ghost Who Walks. As well as being relatable, the Phantom was comprehensive and recognizable in his way of reasoning, and in his ethical and moral stance between right and wrong which made him somewhat unique. In many ways, he came across as a living history text book where he, the twenty-first generation, or any of his ancestors always seemed to have a certain knack for getting caught up in conflicts familiar from history class, newspaper articles, or just outside our windows. And like us school children, his favorite drink was milk.

In a newspaper article to commemorate the Phantom's 65th year in the Swedish domain, journalist Pär Wirtén defines the American-made crime fighter as a "Swedish superhero," noting that there is no other place in the world where the Phantom is as loved as in Sweden. In an attempt to pinpoint the actual reasons for this, Wirtén identifies something familiar about the Phantom as if he lives in our political reflexes, mirroring the public landscape around us.[1] This is a book about these political reflexes, which seeks to answer the question of how an American superhero series about the descendent of an English aristocrat living in the African jungle started to reflect values that made him familiar to people in a Nordic country that is often far from the scene of the masked hero's many adventures, becoming a commercial success unrivalled by any other superhero in this part of the world in the process. This is done by considering the relationship between comic book fantasy and radical politics in modern Sweden from 1968 and throughout the seventies. During this period, *The Phantom* not only became Swedish in terms of political ideals but also emerged as the most socially conscious superhero comic.

In order to write this book, I am indebted to Ulf Granberg, iconic editor-in-chief of the Swedish *The Phantom* comic book, and Magnus Knutsson, writer of many of the most renowned adventures produced out of Stockholm, who both kindly invited me to their homes and generously shared their lives and times with the Phantom. While only a handful of their statements are included in the book, their insights have been invaluable in order to carry the project forward. Andreas Eriksson's encyclopedic knowledge of anything and everything in the Phantom universe

has been an invaluable source of information. I am also grateful to Mikael Sol, current editor-in-chief of *The Phantom*, for granting permission to republish panels from the comics discussed in the book.

The Phantom Comics and the New Left: A Socialist Superhero is the end product of a project that I embarked on as part of my previous employment at the University of Glasgow's School of Education, continuing through my current position at the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Learning at Linköping University. I want to express my appreciation to Michele Schweisfurth and Andreas Fejes for their continuous support. I also want to thank Roger Sabin, editor of this series, for his interest in the project and his generous encouragement in transforming it into a book. Finally, Mirja Kalms, a constant source of inspiration, has graciously refrained from complaining too loudly every time another large box of comics marked "research material" moves into our apartment.

* * *

Portions of this book have been published elsewhere. Chapter 2 is a revised version of the article "When The Phantom Became an Anticolonialist: Socialist Ideology, Swedish Exceptionalism, and the Embodiment of Foreign Policy" in *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, and Chapter 3 is a revised version of "The Phantom fights Apartheid: New Left Ideology, Solidarity Movements and the Politics of Race" in *Inks: Journal of the Comics Studies Society*. For permission to republish, I thank the editors, journals and presses.

Linköping, Sweden Robert Aman

Note

1. *Sydsvenskan*, June 25, 2015.

Contents

List of Figures

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This chapter introduces the Phantom, his backstory, and publication history in different parts of the world. The chapter continues by introducing the main argument of the book that the Phantom, a product of American mass culture, was refashioned to meet the interests and demands of a Swedish audience. Some of the most active contributors to the series in recent decades have been the Sweden-based creators known as Team Fantomen. Team Fantomen became an international publication node in *The Phantom* franchise in 1972 when they set up their official production of licensed scripts which enabled them to redefine the character, accused of both racism and sexism, in line with the progressive Left-wing politics which dominated Swedish politics and public discourse throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Keywords The Phantom · New Left · Lee Falk · Superhero comics · Ideology · Socialism

On Wednesday August 27, 1986, a larger crowd than usual had paid the entrance fee at Parken Zoo in the Swedish town of Eskilstuna. This time the public was not there to visit the zoo's white tigers—the park's main marketing focus—but to witness Lee Falk (1911–1991), creator

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of *The Phantom*, officially opening the zoo's latest attraction: *Fantomenland* (*Phantom Land*). "Fantastic. Wonderful. Amazing," were the spontaneous comments picked up by a journalist from the local daily, *Folket*, accompanying Falk around as he inspected the amusement park devoted to his creation. Although an industrial city located outside Stockholm may seem a long way from the exotic jungle environment where the Phantom resides on the comic pages, visitors could enter his home in the ancient Skull Cave, sit on the Skull Throne, inspect the cave's vast treasure trove, roam around a scaled-down replica of a jungle village and, of course, meet and greet the Phantom himself in person. In a later interview with *Princetown Arts*, Falk expressed both joy and astonishment at the global spread and apparent commercial appeal of his character, referring to the theme park as a "modest version of Disneyland."[1]

The Phantom, an adventure series set in the fictional African nation-state of Bangalla, debuted as a daily strip in 1936, making him a pioneer in the superhero genre. Despite his mythical name, however, the Phantom is an ordinary man without the mutant powers often associated with superheroes—from Superman and Green Lantern to Wonder Woman and Aquaman—that rose to fandom around the same period—times that are often referred to retrospectively as the "Golden Age of comics." Although he displays most of the essential characteristics included in definitions of a superhero in recent scholarly work—"enemies, a strong moral code, a secret identity, a costume" (McLain 2009, 1; cf. Coogan 2006; Reynolds 1992)—the Phantom makes up for his lack of extraordinary powers with ingenuity, skill and integrity as he faces everything the criminal world can throw at him. In theory, his abilities are such as any reader could achieve with the right dedication and training. In contrast to most readers, however, the Phantom rights, wrongs and combats evil in all its forms in the dense jungle he calls home ("the Deep Woods") as well as in every corner of the world.

Despite being a lone ranger and subsequently working almost exclusively alone—whether battling pirates on the African coast, taking on organized crime in Italy or resolving a kidnapping drama in Mexico—the Phantom can count on the infinite support of several key characters. A constant companion is Devil, his faithful gray mountain wolf, often mistaken for a dog by others to which the Phantom readily replies: "He's not a dog, he's a wolf." Having developed an understanding only rivaled in comic books by that between Tintin and Snowy, Devil understands almost everything the Phantom tells him and does not shy away from showing